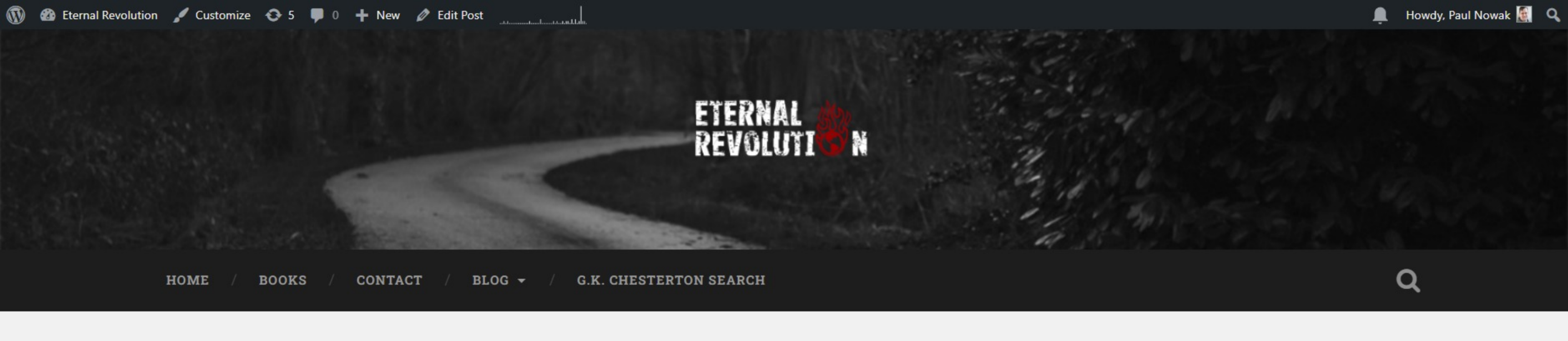




A Want of Something to Do: Guest Post by G.K. Chesterton



This post is an excerpt from G.K. Chesterton's personal notebook, published for the first time in his biography by friend and publisher Masie Ward. According to Ward, he did not yet consider himself a Christian, but noted the disparity between modern Christians chasing a cause (in this case Socialism) and Christianity as Christ preached it.

Now, for my own part, I cannot in the least agree with those who see no difference between Christian and modern Socialism, nor do I for a moment join in some Christian Socialists' denunciations of those worthy middle-class people who cannot see the connection. For I cannot help thinking that in a way these latter people are right. No reasonable man can read the Sermon on the Mount and think that its tone is not very different from that of most collectivist speculation of the present day, and the Philistines feel this, though they cannot distinctly express it. There is a difference between Christ's Socialist program and that of our own time, a difference deep, genuine and all important, and it is this which I wish to point out.

Let us take two types side by side, or rather the same type in the two different atmospheres. Let us take the "rich young man" of the Gospels and place beside him the rich young man of the present day, on the threshold of Socialism. If we were to follow the difficulties, theories, doubts, resolves, and conclusions of each of these characters, we should find two very distinct threads of self-examination running through the two lives. And the essence of the difference was this: the modern Socialist is saying, "What will society do?" while his prototype, as we read, said, "What shall I do?" Properly considered, this latter sentence contains the whole essence of the older Communism. The modern Socialist regards his theory of regeneration as a duty which society owes to him, the early Christian regarded it as a duty which he owed to society; the modern Socialist is busy framing schemes for its fulfilment, the early Christian was busy considering whether he would himself fulfil it there and then; the ideal of modern Socialism is an elaborate Utopia to which he hopes the world may be tending, the ideal of the early Christian was an actual nucleus "living the new life" to whom he might join himself if he liked. Hence the constant note running through the whole gospel, of the importance, difficulty and excitement of the "call," the individual and practical request made by Christ to every rich man, "sell all thou hast and give to the poor."

To us Socialism comes speculatively as a noble and optimistic theory of what may [be] the crown of progress, to Peter and James and John it came practically as a crisis of their own Daily life, a stirring question of conduct and renunciation.

We do not therefore in the least agree with those who hold that modern Socialism is an exact counterpart or fulfilment of the socialism of Christianity. We find the difference important and profound, despite the common ground of anti-selfish collectivism. The modern Socialist regards Communism as a distant panacea for society, the early Christian regarded it as an immediate and difficult regeneration of himself: the modern Socialist reviles, or at any rate reproaches, society for not adopting it, the early Christian concentrated his thoughts on the problem of his own fitness and unfitness to adopt it: to the modern Socialist it is a theory, to the early Christian it was a call; modern Socialism says, "Elaborate a broad, noble and workable system and submit it to the progressive intellect of society." Early Christianity said, "Sell all thou hast and give to the poor."

This distinction between the social and personal way of regarding the change has two sides, a spiritual and a practical which we propose to notice. The spiritual side of it, though of less direct and revolutionary importance than the practical, has still a very profound philosophic significance. To us it appears something extraordinary that this Christian side of Socialism, the side of the difficulty of the personal sacrifice, and the patience, cheerfulness, and good temper necessary for the protracted personal surrender is so constantly overlooked. The literary world is flooded with old men seeing visions and young men dreaming dreams, with various stages of anti-competitive enthusiasm, with economic apocalypses, elaborate Utopias and mushroom destinies of mankind. And, as far as we have seen, in all this whirlwind of theoretic excitement there is not a word spoken of the intense practical difficulty of the summons to the individual, the heavy, unrewarding cross borne by him who gives up the world.

For it will not surely be denied that not only will Socialism be impossible without some effort on the part of individuals, but that Socialism if once established would be rapidly dissolved, or worse still, diseased, if the individual members of the community did not make a constant effort to do that which in the present state of human nature must mean an effort, to live the higher life. Mere state systems could not bring about and still less sustain a reign of unselfishness, without a cheerful decision on the part of the members to forget selfishness even in little things, and for that most difficult and at the same time most important personal decision Christ made provision and the modern theorists make no provision at all. Some modern Socialists do indeed see that something more is necessary for the golden age than fixed incomes and universal stores tickets, and that the fountain heads of all real improvement are to be found in human temper and character. Mr. William Morris, for instance, in his "News from Nowhere" gives a beautiful picture of a land ruled by Love, and rightly grounds the give-and-take camaraderie of his ideal state upon an assumed improvement in human nature. But he does not tell us how such an improvement is to be effected, and Christ did. Of Christ's actual method in this matter I shall speak afterwards when dealing with the practical aspect, my object just now is to compare the spiritual and emotional effects of the call of Christ, as compared to those of the vision of Mr. William Morris. When we compare the spiritual attitudes of two thinkers, one of whom is considering whether social history has been sufficiently a course of improvement to warrant him in believing that it will culminate in universal altruism, while the other is considering whether he loves other people enough to walk down tomorrow to the market-place and distribute everything but his staff and his scrip, it will not be denied that the latter is likely to undergo certain deep and acute emotional experiences, which will be quite unknown to the former. And these emotional experiences are what we understand as the spiritual aspect of the distinction. For three characteristics at least the Galilean programme makes more provision; humility, activity, cheerfulness, the real triad of Christian virtues.

Humility is a grand, a stirring thing, the exalting paradox of Christianity, and the sad want of it in our own time is, we believe, what really makes us think life dull, like a cynic, instead of marvellous, like a child. With this, however, we have at present nothing to do. What we have to do with is the unfortunate fact that among no persons is it more wanting than among Socialists, Christian and other. The isolated or scattered protest for a complete change in social order, the continual harping on one string, the necessarily jaundiced contemplation of a system already condemned, and above all, the haunting pessimistic whisper of a possible hopelessness of overcoming the giant forces of success, all these impart undeniably to the modern Socialist a tone excessively imperious and bitter. Nor can we reasonably blame the average money-getting public for their impatience with the monotonous virulence of men who are constantly reviling them for not living communistically, and who after all, are not doing it themselves. Willingly do we allow that these latter enthusiasts think it impossible in the present state of society to practise their ideal, but this fact, while vindicating their indisputable sincerity, throws an unfortunate vagueness and inconclusiveness over their denunciations of other people in the same position. Let us compare with this arrogant and angry tone among the modern Utopians who can only dream "the life," the tone of the early Christian who was busy living it. As far as we know, the early Christians never regarded it as astonishing that the world as they found it was competitive and unregenerate; they seem to have felt that it could not in its pre-Christian ignorance have been anything else, and their whole interest was bent on their own standard of conduct and exhortation which was necessary to convert it. They felt that it was by no merit of theirs that they had been enabled to enter into the life before the Romans, but simply as a result of the fact that Christ had appeared in Galilee and not in Rome. Lastly, they never seem to have entertained a doubt that the message would itself convert the world with a rapidity and ease which left no room for severe condemnation of the heathen societies.

With regard to the second merit, that of activity, there can be little doubt as to where it lies between the planner of the Utopia and the convert of the brotherhood. The modern Socialist is a visionary, but in this he is on the same ground as half the great men of the world, and to some extent of the early Christian himself, who rushed towards a personal ideal very difficult to sustain. The visionary who yearns toward an ideal which is practically impossible is not useless or mischievous, but often the opposite; but the person who is often useless, and always mischievous, is the visionary who dreams with the knowledge or the half-knowledge that his ideal is impossible. The early Christian might be wrong in believing that by entering the brotherhood men could in a few years become perfect even as their Father in Heaven was perfect, but he believed it and acted flatly and fearlessly on the belief: this is the type of the higher visionary. But all the insidious dangers of the vision; the idleness, the procrastination, the mere mental aestheticism, come in when the vision is indulged, as half our Socialistic conceptions are, as a mere humour or fairy-tale, with a consciousness, half-confessed, that it is beyond practical politics, and that we need not be troubled with its immediate fulfilment. The visionary who believes in his own most frantic vision is always noble and useful. It is the visionary who does not believe in his vision who is the dreamer, the idler, the Utopian. This then is the second moral virtue of the older school, an immense direct sincerity of action, a cleansing away, by the sweats of hard work, of all those subtle and perilous instincts of mere ethical castle-building which have been woven like the spells of an enchantress, round so many of the strong men of our own time.

The third merit, which I have called cheerfulness, is really the most important of all. We may perhaps put the comparison in this way. It might strike many persons as strange that in a time on the whole so optimistic in its intellectual beliefs as this is, in an age when only a small minority disbelieve in social progress, and a large majority believe in an ultimate social perfection, there should be such a tired and blasé feeling among numbers of young men. This, we think, is due, not to the want of an ultimate ideal, but to that of any immediate way of making for it: not of something to hope but of something to do. A human being is not satisfied and never will be satisfied with being told that it is all right: what he wants is not a prediction of what other people will be hundreds of years hence, to make him cheerful, but a new and stirring test and task for himself, which will assuredly make him cheerful. A knight is not contented with the statement that his commander has hid his plans so as to insure victory: what the knight wants is a sword. This demand for a task is not mere bravado, it is an eternal and natural part of the higher optimism, as deep-rooted as the foreshadowing of perfection.



Paul Nowak Edit profile

Paul Nowak is a husband and father of 7, who also happens to be a writer and author. He has written [The Way of the Christian Samurai](#) among other books.

Add Social Links

Settings

Share this:

- Email
- Print
- X
- Reddit
- Facebook
- Tumblr
- LinkedIn

Customize buttons



Published by Paul Nowak

Paul Nowak is a husband and father of 7, who also happens to be a writer and author. He has written [The Way of the Christian Samurai](#) among other books.



View all posts by Paul Nowak

May 2, 2014

Charity

action, G.K. Chesterton, youth



The Christian Art of Judging Others



7 Most Popular G.K. Chesterton Quotes He Never Said



Edit

TAKE THE DISCUSSION TO THE WIDER WEB. SHARE AND DISCUSS ELSEWHERE, OR REPLY TO THE AUTHOR DIRECTLY AT WORDSMITH -AT- ETERNALREVOLUTION.COM

Search ...



GET BLOG POSTS IN YOUR EMAIL

Get a FREE ebook copy of *The Eternal Revolution* when you sign up!

Email address:

Your email address

Sign up

READ MORE BY PAUL NOWAK

List of Books by Paul Nowak
Paul Nowak's Page on Goodreads
Paul Nowak's Page on Amazon

CONNECT WITH SOCIAL NETWORKS

Eternal Revolution on Twitter
Paul Nowak on GoodReads
Eternal Revolution on Facebook

RECENT POSTS

- » Prophecy of "Guilt" – Guest Post by Caryl Houselander
- » Fathers as First Warriors & Guardians – Guest Post by Myles Connolly
- » Condemnation of the Epiphany Riots
- » Attending JAFAX in Grand Rapids this Weekend
- » Samaritan is not Synonymous with Charity

CATEGORIES

- » Christian Samurai
- » Christmas
- » Eternal Revolution Updates
- » Fields of Thought
- » Heroic Virtue
- » Charity
- » Faith
- » Hope
- » Uncategorized

SUBSCRIBE TO UPDATES!

Get a FREE ebook copy of *The Eternal Revolution* when you sign up!

Email address:

Your email address

Sign up

DISCLOSURES

The super-simple [Privacy Policy](#) and [Affiliate Declaration](#) can be found [here](#).

BLOG CATEGORIES

- » Christian Samurai
- » Christmas
- » Eternal Revolution Updates
- » Fields of Thought
- » Heroic Virtue
- » Charity
- » Faith
- » Hope
- » Uncategorized